



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

NEWS RELEASE

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BAUCUS CRITICAL OF BUSH RX DRUG PLAN **Senator Says White House Plan Wouldn't Help Rural Seniors**

(Washington, D.C.) - Stating that Montana seniors deserve the same treatment as seniors in urban areas, today Montana Senator Max Baucus sharply criticized President Bush's plan to force seniors into private healthcare plans, in order to receive prescription drug coverage.

Baucus, top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, spoke to the American Medical Association convention in Washington, where the president earlier in the day outlined his Medicare proposal that would prod seniors into an HMO in order to receive prescription drug coverage.

Baucus said the president's drug plan won't work in rural states like Montana, where Medicare managed care failed several years ago, and would force seniors to choose between "the family doctor they know and trust and the prescription drugs they need."

"Does it make sense that a senior in California who joins an HMO gets coverage for drugs to lower her cholesterol and treat her glaucoma, while her sister - who lives in Montana and stays in the traditional Medicare program - cannot," Baucus asked the nation's top health care providers. "I don't believe so. Medicare has never before discriminated against beneficiaries based on their choice of health plans. We can't start now."

Baucus supports a plan under Medicare that would allow all seniors to get prescription drug coverage while continuing in the traditional fee-for-service Medicare program.

"Private plans have not fared well in Medicare up to now," Baucus said. "In short, I cannot support any proposal that would use carrots or sticks to encourage seniors to enroll in private plans. The traditional Medicare fee-for-service program must remain a viable option for all Medicare beneficiaries."

Rural and sparsely populated states like Montana have fewer – if any -- private and Medicare managed care plans than urban states. Montana's only Medicare managed care plan, based in Billings, failed several years ago.

As top Democrat on the Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicare, Baucus will play a key role in passing a new Medicare drug benefit. And as Congress begins to debate reforming Medicare, Baucus said he will work together with the White House and both parties in Congress to provide all seniors with a prescription drug benefit and make sure they can use their family doctor.

Saying he is open to exploring ways to provide that drug benefit through a private, insurance-based plan, Baucus said seniors in private plans must be protected by a government back-up system that would provide them with standard prescription drug benefits if a private plan fails.